

Neo-Victorian Biofiction and the Special/Spectral Case of Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus*

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Fictional life-writing of real subjects has established itself as a significant subgenre of historical fiction. Part of what Christian Gutleben calls the prevalent trend of “bringing back to life voices of the past and particularly of the Victorian era” (16), this so-called “biofiction” reflects aspects of postmodern memory and trauma culture, as well as capitalising on our reality TV show fascination with confession,¹ voyeurism, and celebrity, just as does literal biography and autobiography. Neo-Victorian biofiction only accentuates these obsessions through its preferred revelations of the salacious and traumatic aspects of the lives of participants in the long nineteenth century.

Neo-Victorian biofiction may be defined as the mainly literary, dramatic, or filmic re-imaginings of the lives of actual individuals who lived during the long nineteenth century, in which said individuals provide the sole or joint major textual foci and narrated/narrating subjects, rather than serving as mere supporting characters or appearing only in brief vignettes to add period colour and interest. In spite of the prevalent descriptive use of “biofiction” in neo-Victorian criticism, however, the term remains curiously under-theorised as regards the differing strategic aesthetic and (un)ethical approaches that writers take to their subjects.² This essay proposes three descriptive modes to analyse neo-Victorian life-writing: “celebrity biofiction” – possibly the most dominant mode, though more extensive mapping is still required to establish this – “biofiction of marginalised subjects”, and “appropriated biofiction”. I deliberately avoid employing the term “category”, as that would suggest a taxonomical subdivision determined by unique characteristics clearly differentiating one class of texts from another. As will become apparent, however, neo-Victorian biofictional modes often intermingle, overlap, and share characteristics, with some texts operating in several modes simultaneously.

Both “factual” life-writing and biofiction explore subjectivity’s emergence from the complex confluence of narrated past and writing present, while simultaneously testing the epistemological limits encountered in the (re-)construction of past lives and selves. Discussing the turn to “[b]iographilia” (37) in recent neo-Victorian literature, Cora Kaplan remarks that “it is now an almost clichéd assumption that autobiography and memoir inevitably construct and invent their authors as quasi-fictional characters. Biography, although it may seek to modify and correct self-representation, takes the same liberties. The novelisation of biography represents only the next logical stage in this process” (65). In one sense, biofiction merely develops existing novelising tendencies within auto/biographical practice, which problematise our understanding of life-writing’s self-revelation and the revelation of Others’ selves. Dave Tell argues that “we no longer live simply in a confessional culture” but “a culture defined by *confessional anxiety*: an anxiety born of an uncertainty about which texts should count as confessions” (1, original emphasis). That is, Tell highlights distinctions between presumed authentic as opposed to duplicitous self-disclosures among the proliferating examples of “this now-ubiquitous rhetorical form” (6). Biofiction reflects a comparable ambivalence as to which texts perform legitimate memory work and which engage in falsifying cultural and/or popular memory of once-living persons. Yet Kaplan stresses biofiction’s resistance to evacuating referentiality altogether: “the ‘bio’ in biofiction also references a more essentialised and embodied element of identity, a subject less than transcendent but more than merely discourse” (65). Biofictional subjects thus

partake of an uneasy liminal existence, an inter-subjective half-life between self and Other, fact and fiction, embodiment and textualisation.

1. Othered Subjects

This indeterminate half-life is exemplified by Saartjie or Sarah Baartman, the titular subject of Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003). On a number of counts, the text provides a model case-study to investigate the aesthetic and ethical complications of re-imagining historical Others. Firstly, it highlights what Ansgar Nünning terms biofiction's typically postmodern, self-reflexive, "epistemological problematization of life-writing itself" ("An Intertextual Quest" 29). Not least, the primary first-person narrator, Baartman,³ reveals at the outset that she is already dead, beginning her story with her own demise on New Year's Day, 1816.⁴ The novel thus foregrounds both its representation's illusoriness and the spectral trope identified as central to neo-Victorian writing (Arias and Pulham; Kontou; Mitchell; Wolfreys), haunted by its status as a mere trace or simulacra of elusive lived and embodied history. The biofictional Baartman's voice only falls silent nearly two centuries after her (first) death when, following a formal 1994 request by President Nelson Mandela, her bodily remains are finally repatriated to post-Apartheid South Africa in 2002 and given proper burial. (Preserved for science, the historical Baartman's skeleton, genitals, and brain remained on display at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, until 1974 and were included in external exhibitions as late as 1994.) The spectral mode simultaneously attests to and calls into doubt the "authenticity" of "her" confessional narrative. Without the existence of actual surviving testimony in her own words,⁵ Baartman functions as the real-life counterpart to the fictional madwoman in the attic from *Jane Eyre* (1847), of whom Jean Rhys famously remarked, "She seemed such a poor ghost, I thought I'd like to write her a life" (qtd. in Bernstein 50). Rhys, of course, actualised her ambition in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), her acclaimed "prequel" to Brontë's novel. In *Hottentot Venus*, Chase-Riboud similarly engages in ghostwriting – as well as *ghost* writing – Baartman's notorious life.

The second reason to select Chase-Riboud's novel as case-study relates to the nature of Baartman's life, which renders her a prototypical harbinger of our modern image and celebrity culture, personality cult, and commodification. Fêted as the "Hottentot Venus" in Britain and France, both freak show exhibit and anthropological spectacle, Baartman featured widely in newspaper reports, satirical cartoons, and advertising of the period. Her extreme Othering as an object of Western knowledge and curiosity throws into relief comparable risks attendant on fictional life-writing, including voyeurism, exploitation, (sexual) fantasy, profit, or appropriation for racial and national identity politics. On the one hand, *Hottentot Venus* critiques how Baartman was made to serve as an atavistic Other, against which Britishness and Frenchness, Western rationality and civilisation were measured and defined. To adopt Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's terms, Baartman is "invoked as the Other of Europe as Self" (281), the "parasubjective" (274) subaltern consolidating Europe's "own subject status" (293) through conversely being denied self-representation and subjecthood. Chase-Riboud's biofiction seeks to restore to Baartman the full humanity denied her by early nineteenth-century science and popular culture, which categorised her as history's Other even while still living.

On the other hand, the autonomous self which Chase-Riboud, like recent biographers of Baartman, would bestow upon the historical Other can itself be viewed as an imposed projection, being a distinctly Western construct.⁶ Moreover, the quest for immediacy and direct access to Baartman's suffering through her first-person confession risks supplanting the Other's real historical trauma. It does so by inviting outright identification rather than

what Dominick LaCapra terms “empathic unsettlement” (41-42, 78-79) – that is, a mode of *secondary* witness-bearing which insists on the crucial distinction between self and suffering Other, hence refusing to assume the Other’s rightful place of enunciation and testimony. *Hottentot Venus* instrumentalises Baartman in the cause of postcolonial and feminist identity politics, restoring voice to the historically marginalised and oppressed through an act of ventriloquism, conducted under the pretence of Baartman speaking for herself. This renders Chase-Riboud uncannily reminiscent of Spivak’s “first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent non-representor who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (292). In *Hottentot Venus*, as much is emphasised by the protagonist’s tendency to reiterate and conspire in her own Othering. In the novel’s prefacing “The Heroine’s Note” (initialled with bold “S.B.”), for instance, even as Baartman states her intention to use the pejorative generic “Hottentot”, she disavows the term as a misappellation and an act of linguistic violence against herself, and elsewhere she claims to be “speaking now in Khoe” (14), her native tongue, though we read only English. As Carlos A. Miranda and Suzette A. Spencer remark, Chase-Riboud’s protagonist occupies a “paradoxical place as a narrator who is already dispossessed in the very language in which she will narrate” – to the point of having to speak under the label imposed upon her by the colonial “violence attendant on her own identity formation” (916). Later, describing the sensation she caused in London, Baartman recalls, “I wore a leather mask which hid half my face, as if the entire vision of me was too monstrous to contemplate. It was my idea” (105). What Lisa Savu calls “the trope of the posthumous” (242)⁷ thus at once re-enacts the “monstrous” social death that precedes Baartman’s physical demise and prefigures her second death as subject at the novel’s close. Baartman’s recitation of abjection transforms the novel into something akin to the analyst’s couch or the talk show stage. As Kevin Glynn remarks of the latter, such confessional platforms prove peculiarly hospitable to “socially excluded voices” and provide sites “where *alterity* regularly asserts its right to exist and to shamelessly occupy a place in the culture” (217, original emphasis). Yet as in the biofictional Baartman’s case, public confession thus re-inscribes alterity in the very act of its contestation.

It is worth noting at this point that, strictly speaking, one must of course distinguish between “biofiction” and “autobiofiction”.⁸ Biofiction re-imagines an historical Other’s life in the third-person or via an omniscient narrator, while autobiofiction narrates the subject’s life from her/his purported first-person point of view. Hence akin to traditional biography, the former overtly “inscribes the self as Other”, whereas the latter, like autobiography, “concerns a knowable self” (Vickery 234), in so far as the re-presented subject is taken to coincide with the narrator’s own (past) self. As Anne Vickery points out, however, such neat divisions are radically undermined by postmodern transformations in conceptualisations of the writing/written subject, because “[i]n postmodernism the writer always already experiences the alterity of self, as one’s agency in language is cast in a rhetoric of suspicion” (234). Narrating subjectivity – one’s own or another’s – becomes a linguistic game with masks, displacing simulations, and acts of self-alienation, exploring the ultimately *unknowable* self as (an) Other. Lucia Boldrini attributes a special “tension between historicity and the desire to free the subject from historical necessity” to autobiofictional texts, which self-consciously “gesture towards historical factuality and literary fictionality, towards ‘truth’ and invention, and exist under the sign of an essential displacement” since inevitably “written by another” (1, original emphasis). Accordingly, Boldrini favours the term “heterobiographies” (2) to highlight the dialogic hybridity of the purported autobiographical subject. Arguably, however, this same compositeness of self-and/as-Other informs biofiction just as much as autobiofiction, since both first *generate* their subjects in the act of always-Othering narration. All biofiction is the writing subject’s imposed/coerced confession or revelation on an Other’s

behalf, perhaps rendering an alternative term such as “auto/biofiction” advisable to emphasise this ontological subjective slippage. However, in view of the established critical currency of “biofiction”, as well as the cumbersomeness of the “auto/biofiction” conjunction, I prefer to retain “biofiction” for the purposes of this article, albeit as an umbrella term that incorporates “autobiofiction” also.

Hottentot Venus not only foregrounds the complex epistemological, ontological, and ethical tensions arising in and from biofiction. It also serves as a limit-case of the form, providing the third and most important reason for selecting the novel as my case-study – it simultaneously exemplifies all three modes of neo-Victorian life-writing: celebrity biofiction, biofiction of marginalised subjects, and appropriated biofiction. Before turning to a more detailed consideration of the novel itself, however, it seems appropriate to attempt a preliminary overview of these different modes and of the wider field of neo-Victorian biofiction.

2. Neo-Victorian Celebrity Biofiction

Celebrity biofiction speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets, and artists,⁹ that may have been left out of surviving records, including subjects’ own self-representations, for example in letters, diaries, or memoirs. In some cases, biofiction will appropriate such media outright, as does Peter Ackroyd in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), which takes the form of a confessional journal recording Wilde’s reminiscences during the final months in Paris leading up to his death. Yet while many writers, like Ackroyd, may take a compassionate approach to their subjects,¹⁰ neo-Victorian life-writing tends to offer quite distinct versions of individuals’ lives to those represented in mainstream biographical and/or literary histories, rarely engaging in hagiography. For instance, Elizabeth Maguire’s posthumously published *The Open Door* (2008), about the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson and her complex intellectual friendship with Henry James, includes an explicit homosexual sex scene between James and an Italian youth. Woolson’s witnessing of this scene leads to the writers’ partial estrangement, with the compromised paranoid James interpreting her accidental intrusion as a personal betrayal. Neo-Victorian biofiction highlights tensions and discrepancies between public and private personas, with transgressive desires providing a frequent focal or fissure point. So too in the case of Charles Dickens’ adulterous preference for the young actress Ellen Ternan over his wife Catherine in Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* (2008) and for both Ternan and his sister-in-law Georgina (“Georgie”) Hogarth in Sebastian Barry’s play *Andersen’s English* (2010). These texts assume an overtly critical stance towards their canonical subject, attributing an exploitative and outright vicious streak to the egocentric Dickens, who treats his wife and children with callous cruelty. In *Wanting*, Flanagan takes a comparable deconstructive approach to Sir John and Lady Franklin through his representations of both as symbolic cannibals (Ho Lai-Ming), and in Sir John’s case as a paedophile also, depicting him raping his adopted Aboriginal daughter Mathinna towards the end of his 1836-43 tenure as Governor of Tasmania. Other examples, such as Lynn Truss’ *Tennyson’s Gift* (1996) and A. S. Byatt’s novella “The Conjugal Angel” (in *Angels and Insects*, 1992), both re-imagining the man the Victorians lauded as their greatest living poet, achieve similar debunking effects through ridicule, satire, and travesty, variously constructing Tennyson as a pathetic, self-obsessed, and decrepit old man. Indeed, virtue and valour have distinctly less appeal than vice, transgression, and obsession in neo-Victorian biofiction, although splendid or undeserved suffering also exerts an evident pulling power, feeding into postmodern trauma culture. One might think, for example, of the tortured genius theme in Adam Foulds’ *The Quickenings Maze* (2009), focusing on the poet John Clare’s descent into

madness, while also re-visioning Tennyson, whose brother Septimus is confined to the same asylum as Clare.

As much as springing from celebratory or commemorative impulses to produce a quasi homage, then, neo-Victorian biofiction may also serve irreverent or prurient purposes. Displaying affinities with sensationalist tabloid journalism and the celebrity exposé, it discloses the metaphorical feet of clay of eminent figures and cultural icons. Indeed, this mode as eagerly resurrects subjects whose prominence derives from notoriety rather than public achievements or artistic endeavours, most evidently so in the case of infamous criminals. Examples include Angela Carter's Lizzie Borden short stories "The Fall River Axe Murders" (1981) and "Lizzie's Tiger" (1981), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), and Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000). These texts too often adopt a sympathetic approach, searching out personal traumas that help explain the perpetrators' violence in terms of rage and resistance against oppression. Criminals are re-humanised and in part exonerated by deflecting blame onto repressive familial, socioeconomic, and political conditions.

Celebrity biofiction works – sometimes simultaneously – in two different directions. On the one hand, it engages in "tunnelling" or "excavating" to disclose incidents that could possibly have happened or "new" aspects of lives about which much is already known. Subjects are "Othered", complicated or re-interpreted from latter-day perspectives, such as queer theory (James, Wilde) or feminism (Dickens), producing "a version of the past [and person] made to best suit the needs of the present" (Boyce and Rousselot 5). Such biofiction relies on a cumulative or additive effect, which may include deliberate adulteration. Nonetheless it can also have an "often remarkable informational value" (Krämer 198), if based on research uncovering actual new material or re-contextualising existing facts in innovative conjectural fashion. Yet the desire to leave no stone unturned merely underlines the *inexhaustibility* of historical Others, permanently displacing any definitive subjectivity with endlessly proliferating subjectivities. As the convicted murderess Grace Marks asks in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, reflecting on the incompatible versions of her circulating in popular culture, "I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?" (23).

On the other hand, celebrity biofiction "infills" notorious but insufficiently documented lives, which have left much of the individual's pre-history (and sometimes post-history) to the events that brought her/him to public attention shrouded in obscurity. As Atwood has remarked on her strategy for re-imagining Marks, "when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it; [...] but, in the parts left unexplained – the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there is a lot of invention" ("In Search" 1515).¹¹ Referring to his re-vision of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly, Carey has similarly stressed the "many different ways to think about what happened out there in the unrecorded historical dark" (qtd. in Boldrini 56). And Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* approaches its titular subject as a veritable "Dark Continent" (281) awaiting discovery by the author and readers, whose efforts to penetrate the Venus' mystery disconcertingly come to resemble those of Baartman's scientific persecutors. While the first strand of celebrity biofiction "fleshes out" a life with alternative competing versions and counter-identities, the second strand is more akin to writing someone a missing interior life (à la Rhys). Put differently, one asks of its subjects: who were they *really*? The other asks: who *were* they?

In the latter case, biofiction depends on a supplementary or compensatory effect, substituting fictional life for a lacuna in knowledge rather than reworking and adding to a wealth of known detail. Or in Chase-Riboud's terms, "fiction [i]s used to illuminate and compensate for

historical amnesia” (“Slavery” 828). These texts are less likely to aim for exhaustive reconstruction, often choosing to highlight, by structural, paratextual, metafictional or other means, their own inconclusiveness and the essential “unknowability” of Others’ lives. Employing the example of Julian Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), Ina Schabert highlights the writer’s responsibility to convey “the mysterious reality” (6) of the historical Other through techniques such as incompleteness and indirectness; indeed, Schabert credits literary language with a special capacity for capturing “the mysterious, elusive quality of existential identity” (17). Along similar lines, Chase-Riboud claims that she does not “write so much about black women as about mysterious women” (qtd. in Spencer 755), “about their mystery, soul, if you like—the human condition within the black condition” (756). More specifically, the Bulgarian-German writer Iliya Troyanov prefaces his biofiction of Sir Richard Francis Burton, *The Collector of Worlds* (2006),¹² with an outright disclaimer that “the characters and plot [...] make no claim to be measured against biographical fact. [...] This novel is intended as a personal approach to a mystery rather than as an attempt at definitive revelation” (n.p.). Arguably for much the same reason, following Marks’ pardon and release from prison and her (fictionally “added”) marriage in *Alias Grace*, Atwood leaves her protagonist’s fate open-ended. Apparently suffering from a tumour or else experiencing a late pregnancy, either of which might curtail her new life in freedom, Marks dissolves back into historical obscurity.

3. Neo-Victorian Biofiction of Marginalised Subjects

The supplementary strain of celebrity biofiction has evident commonalities with my second mode of neo-Victorian biofiction of marginalised subjects. Indeed some texts, such as *Wanting*, “The Conjugal Angel”, and *Alias Grace*, can serve as examples of both. Flanagan’s novel incorporates sections focused through the eyes of the dispossessed Aboriginal “wild” child Mathinna, whom the Franklins futilely attempt to transform into a model of white respectability. Byatt’s novella privileges Emilia Tennyson Jesse’s perspective as she contemplates how her brother usurped her role as mourner for her deceased fiancé Arthur Henry Hallam with *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849), rendering her own subjectivity and sorrow peripheral. Meanwhile Atwood’s protagonist is marginalised in multiple ways; as poor Irish immigrant, lowly servant girl, (intermittent) madwoman, and presumed fallen woman, Marks would likely have left no discernible trace in the public historical record had she not become involved in murder. For writers, such historical subjects’ interest lies less in their personal glamour or prestige than in their comparative indistinctness as private individuals – apart from their relations to famous figures or the myths and “hype” that have been woven round them. Thus the most recent biography of Baartman argues that “Sara entered Europe’s psyche, modernity’s psyche, not as a woman, a living, breathing person [...] but as a metaphor, a figment, a person reduced to a simulacrum. That figment subsumed the person” (Crais and Scully 6). Analogously, in Chase-Riboud’s novel, the ex-slave Reverend Robert Wedderburn accuses Baartman of being “a fake, a myth, a joke, a misrepresentation, a victim used to promote a freakish mythology . . . a false blackness . . . a grotesque caricature of so-called savagery” (133, original ellipses). Later in the text, the artist Nicolas Tiedeman’s reflections again stress Baartman’s inconsequentiality apart from her mythologisation: “we invented her, made her what we wanted and expected her to be—without us, she either wouldn’t have even existed or, if she had, wouldn’t have been of much interest, as she was an ordinary, banal human being” (300).¹³ As such, there is less risk of expropriating the Other’s actual voice, since self-representations by the marginalised subject will often be limited or non-existent. Rather, invented life-writing constitutes what Christian Gutleben and I term “after-witness” or “the fictional re-creation of trauma” – and of historical lives more generally – “that both testifies to and stands in for inadequate, missing, or impossible acts of primary witness-bearing” by the real-life subjects themselves (7). It seeks to restore voice to

the historically voiceless and, in Chase-Riboud's words, make visible the "'invisibles' of history" (qtd. in Spencer 755), "tell[ing] the story as monument" (753). Biofiction commemorates not just the marginalised subjects, but the injustice of their historical disregard and silencing.

This strand of writing has a clear re-visionary and political purpose, underpinned with feminist and postcolonial tendencies of realigning the centre and margins of discourse, redefining who is accorded power of speech. To borrow Julian Wolfrey's terminology, neo-Victorian biofiction issues "a nineteenth-century 'minority report'" (154). Obvious examples include texts that refocus attention from great men on to their wives, sisters, "helpmeets", or muses, as in the case of Byatt's Tennyson Jesse, Maguire's Woolson, Elizabeth ("Lizzie") Siddal in H.D.'s *White Rose and the Red* (1948, first published posthumously 2009) and Paddy Kitchen's *The Golden Veil* (1981), or Constance Lloyd Wilde Holland in Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1998) and Clare Elfmán's *The Case of the Pederast's Wife* (2000). Biofiction of marginalised subjects recuperates untold stories of individuals relegated to bit parts, adjuncts, or appendixes in the life-stories of subjects that mattered, while deemed of comparatively little or no matter in and of themselves. Yet as per the queer Oscar Wilde or mad John Clare, this strand also recoups socially marginalised or condemned aspects of celebrity lives. Or, as in the case of Anca Vlasopolos' *The New Bedford Samurai* (2007) about the shipwrecked Manjiro Nakahama, rescued and educated in America, who became instrumental in Japan's opening to the West, it may rescue individuals' life-stories from obscurity in a culture other than their own. As Vlasopolos' book cover notes, although "revered in Japan", Nakahama remains "virtually unknown in the U.S." and elsewhere.

The causes of marginalisation, of course, are not restricted to gender, sexual orientation, or mental health, but may stem from other attributes such as race, religion, disability, economic position, or any combination of these. Hence the biofiction of servants, sometimes also of different races to their masters or mistresses, constitutes another significant strand. *The Collector of Worlds* intersperses passages focalised through Burton with more extended sections told from the perspectives of Ranji Naukaram, Burton's Indian servant, and of the one-time slave Sidi Mubarak Bombay, who acts as Burton's guide in Africa and, in old age, recounts the quest to discover the source of the Nile to his grandson.¹⁴ Of these figures, Naukaram appears to be a complete invention, receiving no mention in major biographies of Burton by Edward Price (1990) or Mary S. Lovell (1999), which barely mention Burton's staff. Indeed "servants" warrant no separate entry in biographical indexes, including in the most recent Burton biography by Jon R. Godsall (2008). This marginalisation of servant subjects is also contested in Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990), told from the viewpoint of Elizabeth Wilson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's maid who travels with the Brownings to Italy, and in Kate Pullinger's *The Mistress of Nothing* (2009), chronicling the life of Sally Naldrett, who accompanies Lucie, Lady Duff-Gordon, writer of *Letters from Egypt* (1865), abroad. Pullinger's novel opens with Naldrett's haunting admission that, to Duff-Gordon, she "was not fully human" but something more like a "favoured household pet" (1) – a possible ironic reference to Virginia Woolf's early comic biofiction *Flush: A Biography* (1933) with its refocalisation of Barrett Browning's life through the eyes of her dog. Appropriately an authorial note to *Flush* refers to the real-life Wilson as one of "the all-but-silent, the all-but-invisible servant maids of history" (Woolf 160). Comparably, Naldrett describes herself as "part of the background, the scenery" and merely "a useful stage-prop" in Duff-Gordon's life, noting, "I was not a real person to her, not a true soul with all the potential for grace and failure that implies" (1). Pullinger re-imagines a fully *human* life for the servant complete

with “all the potential” denied her because, as the closing “Author’s Note” stresses, “even less” than “next to nothing” is known of Naldrett’s actual existence in contrast to Duff-Gordon’s “celebrated” life (249).

Yet this same contrast also highlights a deeply ambivalent aspect of this strand of fictional life-writing. Arguably, both writers and readers are not wholly – or even primarily – interested in the ex-centric figures themselves apart from the celebrities they serve to throw into relief. To some extent, our absorption in their life-stories stems from the alternative, privileged, or skewed insights and revelations their narratives provide into the (more) noteworthy personalities. This produces a sort of centripetal instead of the desired centrifugal reaction that would disperse imaginative power outwards and away from the cultural centre. Bonnie J. Robinson points out how re-imaginings of Constance Lloyd Wilde Holland repeatedly employ her as an aesthetic “foil” for her queer husband, positioning Wilde rather than his wife as history’s Other (31; see also 23), disregarding Constance’s own complexity and political engagement, as in the Rational Dress campaign. Robinson concludes that “the neo-Victorian strategy of recovering historically sidelined subjects [...] can itself prove highly selective – even to the extent of constituting a form of (re)discrimination” and reiterating individuals’ status as “culture’s internally colonised ‘Others’” (22). Inadvertently, marginalised subjects may again be relegated to supporting roles – the very status biofiction was supposed to rescue them from – even in their own life-stories. Helen Davies pertinently warns against instrumentalising history’s Others as mouthpieces for our own theoretical concerns and political agendas, counterfeiting a “dialogue” or “exchange” that amounts to little more than “neo-Victorianism talking to itself”, so that regardless of “benevolent intentions”, the silence/silencing of nineteenth-century subjects ends up being “compounded by the ventriloquial process” (7). Those seemingly being written a life risk being turned into poor ghosts once more. In part, this ethical cul-de-sac undermines the liberative aspirations of biofiction of marginalised subjects.

4. Neo-Victorian Appropriated Biofiction

My third mode of appropriated biofiction foregrounds this problematic still further, implicating “voicing” in a sinister takeover of another’s evacuated subjectivity which, to borrow Davies’ resonant imagery, renders the historical Other a mere ventriloquist’s puppet. Contrary to Martin Middeke’s contention that “the valid historical foil counteracts a postmodern ‘anything goes’” (“Introduction” 4), appropriated biofiction attributes elements of real lives to someone else entirely or uses these lives as springboards to launch into blatantly counterfactual fabrications. This mode of biofiction incorporates two related strands: glossed biofiction and divergent or alternative biofiction, both of which almost inevitably appropriate famous rather than marginalised lives for their purposes. The distinction between celebrity and appropriated biofiction lies in the latter’s much more indiscriminate, opportunistic, and preposterous use of fabulation.

Glossed biofiction relies on supposedly non-referential, made-up characters and plots, which are nonetheless extensively modelled on famous historical subjects, their lives, writings and/or art, often with little or no attempt at any effective disguise. Readers of Margaret (Maggie) Power’s critically neglected *Goblin Fruit* (1987) will readily identify strains of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the brooding painter Nicholas Suiter, obsessively portraying the cutler’s daughter Ida, a “little milliner” (4) turned professional model, whom he paints as Guinevere and the Lady of Shalott in evident Pre-Raphaelite style. After Ida’s death from an apparent laudanum overdose, Suiter dreams of opening her grave to discover her corpse

uncorrupted and “[h]er vermillion hair [...] monstrously abundant” (76), as Power reworks the exhumation of Lizzie Siddal by means of which Rossetti recovered the only extant copy of his early poems, buried with his wife. Meanwhile Suiter’s later black-haired lover Eliza, whom he paints as Proserpine with an “overlong neck and [...] fleshly mouth” (92), evokes Rossetti’s other great love, Jane Morris (née Burden) – though Eliza becomes not a needlework artist but a writer of lurid tales for threepenny magazines produced in their shared Chelsea rooms. Similarly, in A. S. Byatt’s much better known *Possession: A Romance* (1990), the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash is commonly read as a conflation of aspects of Robert Browning and Tennyson, whose works and poetic voices (especially Browning’s dramatic monologues) are reprised in Ash’s/Byatt’s own poems. Meanwhile the poetess Christabel LaMotte and her oeuvre, based heavily on folk and fairy tales, draw on Christina Rossetti and the otherworldliness of much of her poetry, as well as the writings of Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (Byatt’s novel, of course, metafictionally signals its debt to “real” life-writing through its parallel plot-line, which has two twentieth-century academics research the relationship of the Victorian poets through the latter’s discovered correspondence.) In comparable fashion Gaynor Arnold’s *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008) reworks the Dickens’ unhappy marriage from the estranged and exiled Catherine’s viewpoint, but presented under the fictional guise of Dorothea, wife of the famous writer Alfred Gibson. Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) similarly incorporates a reprehensible journalist and would-be author figure, Tobias Oates, who appropriates other people’s lives for his fiction and, “anxious for patronage and success, is a thinly concealed variation on what we know of Dickens’s biography” (Sanders 133). Such biofictions remorselessly “raid” individual histories for raw materials, distilling a quasi “essence” of past personalities and providing a short-hand stereotypical gloss on memorable/scandalous aspects of their lives and times. Referentiality merely serves to engage readers in intellectual games of cultural literacy and allusion spotting, adding an intertextual palimpsestic density to the texts. Ultimately, however, these biofictions have less to do with nineteenth-century subjects than with bearing witness to the continuing fascination exerted by “the Victorian” over individual writers’ imaginations and the collective cultural unconscious.

The divergent or alternative mode of appropriated biofiction is more exploitative again. Repurposing real lives for still greater sensational effects, it introduces elements without any factual basis whatever or redeploys historical subjects in alternate realities and other worlds altogether. Life-writing – if it can still be called that – becomes free-wheeling phantasmagoria. Typical examples include Giles Brandreth’s Oscar Wilde mystery series (2008-present), which transforms the Victorian writer into a formidable Sherlockian sleuth, Laura Joh Rowland’s *The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Bronte* [sic] (2008) and its follow-up *Bedlam: The Further Secret Adventures of Charlotte Bronte* [sic] (2010), which create a secret agent alter-ego for their titular heroine, and Mark Hodder’s Burton and Swinburne trilogy (2010-present), in which Sir Richard Burton and Algernon Charles Swinburne likewise turn detectives and secret agents of the crown, entangled in fantastical plots involving time-travel in a steampunk Victorian Britain. Indeed, the implication of famous figures in shady dealings, conspiracies, outright criminality, or sinister supernatural happenings constitutes a particular popular device, as in Dan Simmons’ *Drood* (2009) with its Gothic metamorphoses of Dickens and Wilkie Collins, Seth Grahame-Smith’s fantasy horror mashup *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* (2010), or Tim Powers’ *Hide Me Among the Graves* (2012), in which the Rossetti siblings both resurrect and combat vampires. Other works transpose subjects to other planets, as does Philip José Farmer’s science fiction fantasy *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* (1971), in which dead humans are resurrected on an alien world, including Sir Richard Burton who promptly sets off to discover the source and

purpose of the mysterious river from which Farmer's *Riverworld* series (1971-83) draws its name. Any epistemological or ethical import is rendered irrelevant, with flagrant falsification and sheer entertainment substituting as the sole *raison-d'être* of fictional life-writing.

The third biofictional mode most forcefully illustrates how, according to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, the blurring of "fictional and factual individuals [...] highlight[s] the ways in which the derivative nature of neo-Victorianism *consumes* the figures it seeks to emulate" (19, added emphasis). Biofiction becomes a vampiric and cannibalistic enterprise, surrendering its liberal and liberative ideological credentials. Boldrini goes further still, questioning readers' good faith in devouring such fictions: "there is something somewhat disturbing and thrilling in this identity theft (would we feel so indulgent if it were *our* name and identity being thus usurped?), and this is part of the attraction of these books" (2, original emphasis). Indeed, indulgence might be similarly lacking where loved ones, family members, or friends are concerned, and though the term "libel" is not commonly encountered in critical discussions of fictional life-writing, it arguably has relevance in the context of trans-generational memory or what Marianne Hirsch has named "postmemory". Hirsch's term refers to the gradual transmutation of transmitted first-hand memory, especially of traumatic events, over the course of time and through subsequent generations. Grounded in "a personal/familial/generational sense of ownership and protectiveness" towards predecessors' suffering and passed on testimony (1), postmemory establishes an emotional and imaginative "connection" (3) with another's experience, so intense that the latter becomes incorporated into the self-defining memories of the subject who comes after.¹⁵ Potentially, appropriated biofictions, especially those that vilify or demonise, may thus be experienced as a personal violation of the descendant's self, her/his mourning for the Other, and the sanctity of preserved memory and survivor testimony. At best, appropriated biofiction constitutes an imposition; at worst it equates to imaginative grave robbery – the stealing of a voice, life, and identity rather than a body.¹⁶ Yet to some extent, this transgressive tendency infuses all modes of neo-Victorian life-writing, irrespective of their narrative politics.

5. Case Study: Chase-Riboud's/Baartman's Spectral Biofiction

Regardless of any intended ethical recuperation, biofiction, I want to propose, thrives on an inherent sense of simultaneously seductive and transgressive violation grounded in a composite and reciprocal self-Othering. The Othering of the historical subject in the process of fictional life-writing simultaneously Others the writing/reading self. This process is clearly apparent in *Hottentot Venus*, which makes its first-person author/narrator and readers conspire in the Othering process. Constructing Baartman as a subject speaking from a *non-subject* position as a ghost, her (after)life-story colludes in her dehumanisation and absolute Othering by foregrounding those same processes via her vivid reliving of the persistent traumatic identity thefts she was subjected to in life. Thus early on, Baartman recalls the brutal extermination of her Khoekhoe community by white settlers, including her mother's decapitation "for sport", the indigenes' heads constituting favoured "hunting trophies to hang on their walls or send back to England" (14). A few years later, Baartman's father and most of her tribe are massacred in similar fashion, herded together and butchered "like sheep to the slaughter until the Englishmen's arms were so tired they couldn't hold their guns up to aim" (16). The sexual abuse inflicted on Baartman as a teenager by her Afrikaner masters, the Caesar brothers, reinforces her subhuman status. Her objectification is compounded when Hendrick Caesar and his partner, the ship's surgeon Alexander William Dunlop, bring Baartman to England to exploit her as a poked and prodded, half-naked freak show exhibit in a cage, while her image is mercenarily appropriated to sell consumer goods from "Hottentot Venus soap" and "Hottentot Venus bleach" to "Hottentot Venus corsets" and gloves (155).

Even her self-appointed advocates from the African Institution who – against Baartman’s will – try to have Caesar and Dunlop convicted for detaining her in involuntary servitude, deny the protagonist’s agency by instrumentalising her for their Abolitionist cause in a crowd-pulling celebrity trial. Her selfhood and identity are “stolen” again by the coverture of a faked (bigamous) marriage with Dunlop and Baartman’s subsequent loss in a wager cum “[w]ife-sale” (218) by her owner-“husband” to the French animal trainer Sieur Réaux, who proceeds to exhibit her in France. The culmination of her dehumanisation occurs at the hands of Baron Georges Léopold Cuvier, who has Baartman displayed naked before the scientific community at the Jardins des Plantes, Paris, re-classifies her as a naturalist specimen and evolutionary missing link, unsuccessfully tries to rape her and, after her death, makes good his disappointment by publically dissecting/desecrating her body before an avid audience of fellow scientists. The retention of her genitalia, skeleton, and brain as museum show pieces merely serves as the logical endpoint of this literal and literary resurrectionism.

Yet throughout this traumatic litany of self-dispossessions Baartman’s narrative also resists the appropriating gaze and projections of savagery and monstrosity upon her, reflecting them back onto her victimisers and both her intra- and extra-textual audiences. She rejects not just contempt, but also pity and compassion as “this too was part of the game; to pity the monster, the animal, the dis-human” (5). Here the narrative implicates biofiction, author, and readers in that same game, which would construct the twenty-first-century subject as ethical witness, morally superior to the benighted nineteenth-century “barbarians” and their hapless victim. Not coincidentally, during both the assault Baartman is subjected to by Peter Caesar at the St Luke’s Orphanage in Cape Town (40-1) and Hendrick Caesar’s violent rape of her at his brother’s farm (53), potential witnesses – respectively the orphanage headmistress and the Caesar family, who hears her screams – refuse to assume a witnessing role or intervene. Implicitly, Chase-Riboud’s readers are aligned with these complicit bystanders as the narrative re-enacts Baartman’s victimisation for our consumption.¹⁷ As much is also suggested by another incorporated biofictional vignette, in which Jane Austen’s ruminations invite self-reflexivity on the reader’s part: “What had I really felt, standing there in the crowd [...], witnessing this cruel humiliation of one of my sex, but a secret, snivelling joy at my own safety and invulnerability... wasn’t that why I loved freak shows? She, the Venus, was the Other, I was me, Jane, safe within the confines of my privileged provincial white world. I could never be she” (159, un-bracketed ellipses in the original). Chase-Riboud’s narrative politics Other her readers who, like nineteenth-century paying customers or Cuvier’s audience, consume the spectacle of Baartman’s dehumanisation staged for their complicit “delectation” (271), instruction, and self-affirmation.

The self-consciously performative dissection scene in Chapter 21 serves as the novel’s most striking example of reciprocal self-Othering, with the text’s linguistic violence evoking images of rape, cannibalism, and Ripperesque murder. Viewing the scene panoptically, as if from the amphitheatre’s gods, the spectral Baartman depicts Cuvier “devouring” her body (277) and describes him as “nothing more [...] than a hankering canine, an expert in rapine” (278). He cuts into her flesh, “lavishing the skill of a sculptor and the heart of a butcher” upon her while “uttering the sighs of a man in the throes of overwhelming passion”, finally reaching orgasmic release when he excises her “Hottentot apron”, which he triumphantly holds aloft “like a flag” to his audience’s wild applause (281). In spite of being focalised through Sarah’s consciousness, Heilmann and Llewellyn remark that the scene mingles Cuvier’s scientific jargon with “the language of a circus performer crossed with that of a pornographer” (129). Yet, of course, the real “showman” – or rather “show-woman” – is Chase-Riboud in the guise of the “self-authoring” Baartman directing (and dissecting) the

replayed scene. Subjectivity is transformed into a space of performance, what Boldrini describes as “the site of an encounter, a stage where the intricate relations between historical, fictional and authorial [and readerly] subjectivities are played out and explored” (2). It seems no coincidence that Chase-Riboud, a renowned visual artist and sculptor,¹⁸ should have Baartman employ the phrase “lavishing the skill of a sculptor”, disconcertingly rendering Cuvier the author’s double. In a sense, what Baartman terms the Baron’s “slaughterhouse of science” (285) is analogous to the panoptic literary theatre of neo-Victorian biofiction, which re-enacts the violating spectacle so as to penetrate the historical Other’s deepest recesses of suffering subjectivity.

Chase-Riboud’s resort to Gothic excess to critique Baartman’s reduction to pure spectacle throws readers back upon themselves as self-alienated Others, confounding the “self-effacing epistemic effort” that Schabert regards as the ideal disposition “to relive the other’s being” (3). Instead, in “reaching out into otherness” (Schabert 217), we encounter our own. Repeatedly Chase-Riboud’s narrative aligns its readers with the voracious “mob” (285) that eagerly devours the Hottentot Venus’s display. Hence we too become the objects of Baartman’s condemnatory gaze as she assumes the reader’s role as disembodied witness within the text, interpreting the scene and the audience’s response. The violation of the body’s integrity calls into question not just the limits of Baartman’s “I” – having felt no pain at the excision of her brain, sex, or heart, she asks wonderingly, “where, then, resided the soul that could weep for what had come to pass?” (280) – but just as significantly our own location as liberal empathic subjects. Taken out of herself, the spectral Baartman models this same process for the reader, as we too are rendered unrecognisable to ourselves. As Miranda and Spencer stress, “the narrating subject [...] cannot tell her ‘true story’ and be heard without inflecting it through the very violating terms that occasion its telling in the first place” (916-7). In so doing, the (self-)violation of the narrator simultaneously violates the reader. “This is no freak show” (285), Baartman desperately contends after her autopsy, but it is just that – a freak show that puts postmodern subjectivity and its appetite for relived suffering and degradation squarely centre stage. Even as Chase-Riboud grants her subject symbolic poetic justice and the experience of eventual homecoming to Africa, her novel inscribes its own transgression in the response of Baartman’s servant-friend Alice Unicorn to her death. Discovering she has arrived too late at the Paris morgue to claim Baartman’s body, Alice feels “nausea and revolt [...] not only against the physicians but myself” (271); like the scientists and Alice, we too have observed Baartman “so minutely” (271) only to watch her die for us all over again.

The text’s double-edged self-consciousness is hardly surprising, considering that *Hottentot Venus* is already Chase-Riboud’s fifth excursion into biofiction.¹⁹ Combining aspects of all three modes of celebrity, marginalised subjects’, and appropriated biofiction, the novel provides a useful limit-case of the possibilities and limitations of the form as both commemorative and exploitative practice. In spite of Baartman’s fame, a cited obituary in the novel summarily strips her of any lasting significance, reiterating her marginalised status: “she will no longer be of interest to anyone except the scalpel of a naturalist” (274). Although this assertion proves hopelessly misguided, so too does biofiction’s compensatory urge, ironically voiced by Baartman herself, when she initially welcomes her departure from Africa as a liberation from symbolic non-personhood: “The insignificance of my former life, my former slavery, my poverty would be washed away. I would invent a new existence that mattered, become a real person, able to exhibit my true nature” (104). Instead she only becomes “real” in the invented persona of a narrating ghost, by acquiring a fictional “life far more monstrous” still (265). The close of *Hottentot Venus* falls squarely into the appropriated

biofiction mode, resorting to complete fabulation, as Baartman metamorphoses into a persecutory spirit of vengeance, relentlessly pursuing her one-time exploiters and abusers around the globe to destroy them, their families, and all they hold dear. In Cuvier's case, Baartman exposes the scientist's falsifications of his own research, haunts his daughter to death, butchers his golden retriever, burns down the Academy of Sciences, and sets alight the church attended by the Baron, "ma[king] sure he died in the cholera epidemic of 1832", after "[a]ll his children died before him" (309). Cuvier's body ends up being dissected on the same table as was her own corpse, while his preserved brain's "weight and size" prove "not that much larger" than Baartman's own (309). In appropriately Gothic fashion, the immaterial life-writing of a ghost²⁰ merges seamlessly into horror story.

Chase-Riboud's refusal to reduce Baartman to the purely corporeal as did her victimisers severs the subject's identity from her embodied life, while simultaneously reclaiming her suffering body for an identitarian politics of self-representation. The posthumous trope provides "a counterweight" to poststructuralist debates about "the so-called 'end of history,' 'erasure of materiality,' and 'the dissolution of the subject'" (Savu 242), instead re-affirming "the 'return of the subject' as [...] an entity" (245), agent and referent – "a historically grounded self" (250). Ingeniously, Baartman's very spectrality reaffirms the (postmodernly suspect) ideal of biofictional truthfulness, much as does Ackroyd in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, as noted by Martin Middeke: "The artist, so it seems, may incorporate and reflect upon epistemological uncertainties caused by the aporias of time and language without obliterating historical consciousness" ("Oscar" 215; see also "Introduction" 3). The (dead) subject only existing *now* in and through language – first coming into being *as subject* in the act of narration – nonetheless assumes a transcendent existence. In spite of the specificity of her trauma, the historical Baartman as signifier becomes unanchored to any particular place and time, inviting continuous redeployment in ever-changing contexts: memorialising African-American servitude in a country she never knew, ghosting the "African Oscars" celebrations, campaigning against human trafficking, assisting youth education, and patronising charitable foundations.²¹

The transnational phenomenon of Baartman, like her biofictional spectral afterlife in *Hottentot Venus*, thus functions as a resonant metaphor for neo-Victorianism itself, which elides strict temporal and national boundaries. As Elizabeth Ho argues, neo-Victorianism is best conceptualised in terms of fluid transculturation, evoking "a global, deterritorialized" nineteenth-century past (189) – and arguably in terms of subjectivity's "transtemporalisation" also, ripe for re-imagining intimate interchanges between (our)selves and historical Others. What might Baartman have to say about the interminable posthumous existence foisted upon her, were we able to summon her spirit in a neo-Victorian séance? Perhaps Baartman would ventriloquise Jean Rhys' wondering voice from shortly before her death: "I'm not fighting oblivion now. I'm fighting...eternity?" (qtd. in Vreeland 233, original ellipses).

Notes

¹ Susan Radstone describes confession as "a cultural mode that has inflected and continues to inform a board range of discourses and domains including not only literature, but also law, medicine and psychology" (16). One of its "defining feature[s]" is "the central place it accords to the suffering of its narrator/central protagonist" (Radstone 38) – a characteristic shared with biofiction. Caroline Lusin suggests that biofiction "satisfies a need similar to that of reality TV" by confronting readers "with an account of other subjectivities" and their

“different preconditions and ethical standards”, a process she deems “an integral part of self-construction” (281).

² One of the few exceptions is the work of Ansgar Nünning, who frequently draws on neo-Victorian novels to construct a typology of biofiction. Nünning’s typology relies on incremental degrees of metafictionality and the extent to which texts foreground the constructivist process of representing historical lives or, conversely, remain silent on this score: “I would suggest designating these main subgenres, which are of course merely ‘ideal types’ [...], as ‘documentary fictional biographies,’ ‘realist fictional biographies,’ ‘revisionist fictional biographies,’ ‘fictional metabiographies,’ and explicit forms of ‘biographic metafiction’” (“Fictional Metabiographies” 201). Put differently, Nünning’s typology focuses on the self-conscious “knowingness” of biofictional narrative, whereas this essay explores what motives underlie the quest to know, what kinds of historical subjects figure as objects of this quest and why.

³ Intermittent shorter sections are focalised through the viewpoints of Baartman’s “husband” Alexander William Dunlop, Jane Austen, the Abolitionist Robert Wedderburn, Baartman’s French manager Sieur Réaux, the artist Nicolas Tiedeman, and the servant Alice Unicorn. The different sections, however, are never interlinked by a heterodiegetic narrator.

⁴ Baartman’s death is more commonly placed at the end of 1815. Chase-Riboud’s change of date to New Year’s Day seems intended to underline Sarah’s “new life” as spectral self-representing subject rather than object of discourse. For a revisionist debate about Baartman’s likely birth date, which Chase-Riboud and most biographies place circa 1789, see Scully and Crais (306).

⁵ Baartman left no diaries or letters. The transcript of the court case against her “managers” contains the only surviving first-person statement from Sarah, and as Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais stress, this is both “a paraphrase of the interview and a translation from Dutch into English”, so that “[e]ven here, we see Sara Baartman at a remove [...] confound[ing] our ability to know her” (320).

⁶ As Scully and Crais point out, Baartman’s Khoekhoe people “originally had no conception of the autonomous individual, indeed no clearly possessive subject, no ‘me,’ ‘myself,’ or ‘I’” (323).

⁷ Savu employs the expression in somewhat different context, relating it specifically to writers’ cultural after-lives. Lucia Boldrini, however, suggests that biofictions, especially those in the first person, *always* write towards death and “already from beyond it” (10), citing Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) as another example where the titular subject “appears to be dead from the beginning” (3). The quasi-prologue of Iliya Trojanov *The Collector of Worlds* (2006), entitled “The Final Transformation”, similarly begins with Sir Richard Francis Burton’s death and the burning of his diaries.

⁸ Numerous terms besides biofiction have been proposed for fictional life-writing of/as historical Others. In addition to Nünning’s already cited terms (see fn. 2), these include “author fiction”, “new fiction biographies”, “*biographies romancées*”, “autobiografiction”, “autofiction”, “heterobiography”, “heteroautobiography”, “biomythography”, “docudrama”, and the Derridean terms “autobiothanatoheterograph[y]” and “otobiography” (Boldrini 9-10, 21, 73), “metabiographical novels” (Middeke, “Oscar” 216), “memoir novels” and “memoir-like fictions” (Radstone 193, 194), “fictional biography” and “*roman vrai*” (Schabert 4, 45), “pseudomemoirs” and “testamentary fictions” (Savu 105, 108), “apocryphal memoir[s]” (Christian Moraru, qtd. in Savu 46), and “novel-biography” (Norman Mailer, qtd. in Epstein 227).

⁹ Explorers and scientists are also widely depicted, as in Roger McDonald’s *Mr. Darwin’s Shooter* (1998) and Harry Thompson’s *This Thing of Darkness* (2005), as well as numerous

novels evoking the disastrous Franklin expedition. British politicians (bar the exception of Queen Victoria) and military commanders feature much more rarely, and then mostly in a colonial capacity abroad, such as Sir John Franklin as Governor of Tasmania in Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008), or the Governor-General of Sudan, Charles George Gordon, in Gillian Slovo's *An Honourable Man* (2012). UK neo-Victorian biofiction thus differs markedly from its US counterpart, which features a wide array of texts re-imagining nineteenth-century political figures, especially principals in the US Civil War, such as President Lincoln, most recently in Stephen Spielberg's film *Lincoln* (2012).

¹⁰ A comparable sympathetic biofictional approach to Henry James is adopted by David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004).

¹¹ Not all writers adopt as rigorous an approach. As Lucia Krämer notes, in spite of relying on known facts, many authors employ "simplification", condensing or combining several events or ancillary personalities, or they selectively incorporate only those details "immediately relevant" to their own constructions of the individuals (198).

¹² Troyanov's novel was originally published in German as *Der Weltensammler*, with the English translation appearing in 2008.

¹³ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn point out that recent biographies of Baartman by Rachel Holmes (2007) and Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully (2009) also succumb to "the mythologizing power of the subject" (120). Such works, they argue, repeatedly "move in the direction of historical biofiction" and implicitly acknowledge that "[e]ven the 'real' Baartman is largely a product of the imagination" (121).

¹⁴ A further perspective on Burton is provided by Abdulla Pasha, the Ottoman governor of the Hijaz (or Hejaz), steward of Mecca and Medina.

¹⁵ "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 5), akin to biofiction, so that arguably it too generates a composite subject of self-and-Other.

¹⁶ Fittingly, William E. Epstein describes the biographical impulse per se as "habitually re-enact[ing] the scene of an abduction" (218). Biographers, he asserts, "lose their (biographical subjects') lives *figuratively*, in and through the interpretive violence inflicted upon those lives by biographical recognition" (222, original emphasis), which deprives them of their "sovereign" (226) subject status by co-opting alterity into "the 'original' sameness of all biographical subjects" (227) – namely, versions of the humanist ego constituted through self-differentiation from the Other. His argument seems equally applicable to biofiction.

¹⁷ Chase-Riboud's technique of refusing to depict the sex-acts outright, for instance designating the rape via ellipses, tantalises readers to imaginatively infill the elisions.

¹⁸ Chase-Riboud's sculptural art includes *Africa Rising* (1998), based on Baartman, which commemorates the eighteenth-century African Burial Ground discovered in lower Manhattan in 1991 (see Chase-Riboud qtd. in Armand 5 and <http://chaseriboud.free.fr/sculptor.html>). Chase-Riboud describes the monument as "intimately intertwined with the novel" which she decided to write following the sculpture's completion (qtd. in Spencer 750).

¹⁹ The other novels are *Sally Hemings: A Novel* (1979), *Valide: A Novel of the Harem* (1986), *Echo of Lions* (1989), and *The President's Daughter* (1994), all set predominantly in the nineteenth century and focusing on different forms of enslavement.

²⁰ The novel never depicts Baartman recording her narrative, either in life or death, thus underlining "the insurmountable gap between a person's life and its written or artistic representations" (Nünning, "An Intertextual Quest" 39).

²¹ Though never having visited the US, Baartman has become a prominent symbol informing African-American feminist criticism, art, and memory work; see, for instance, Deborah Willis's edited collection *Black Venus: 2010* (2010). Baartman's iconic figure also seems

echoed in the AMA, the prize statuette for the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA) or “African Oscars.” Designed in 2006, the AMA, which means “beautiful woman” in some African languages, is meant to embody motherhood as the cradle of African Civilisation (personal email correspondence with Anyiam-Osigwe Peace, AMAA). Fittingly, Baartman’s repatriated remains in Chase-Riboud’s novel are greeted by Africans chanting “Mama Sarah! Mama Sarah!” (316). More explicitly Baartman is commemorated in The Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children (SBCWC) who have suffered abuse. 2011 saw the publication of an educational biofiction of Baartman targeted at young adults, which relates her case to the threat of present-day human trafficking: *They call me Hottentot Venus* by the UK based South African writer Monica Clarke, international ambassador for SBCWC, which benefits from the book sales.

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